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ACADEMIC WRITING + Thesis Structure

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Master's Thesis Guidelines

Before you start planning and writing your thesis:

Go through the guidelines set for a master level thesis at Aalto ARTS.

The guideline offers valuable information on the thesis process, the required content and how the thesis will be assessed.

You will find the current guidelines at aalto.fi:

<https://www.aalto.fi/en/programmes/masters-programme-in-film-and-television/thesis>

Help and guidance for thesis writing

Writing Clinic

- Individual writing tutoring to help you learn how to plan, organise, write and revise academic papers.
- Consultations are generally 60 minutes long.
- You can use the service for a total of **eight hours per academic year**.

Other useful sources for tips on writing a thesis:

<https://into.aalto.fi/display/enopinnot/Recommended+links>

https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14011/writing/106/academic_writing/3

General structure of a thesis

Introduction

- Background/context
- Research question
- Brief review of literature on topic
- Structure of remaining paper

Methodology

- Review of literature on methodology
- Features to be compared and method of comparing them

Materials

- Materials and sources used for the research
- eg. Artistic component, literature review

(Levine, Peter (2005): Excellent dissertations, 83–89.)

General structure of a thesis

Results /Findings

Discussion (analysis)

- Synthesis of findings
- Critique of the literature in light of findings
- Reflections on methodology and materials used

Conclusions

- Answer to Research Question, in brief
- Further implications of the study

(Levine, Peter (2005): Excellent dissertations, 83–89.)

Who is writing:

RECOGNIZE YOUR OWN STYLE AS A WRITER

- Rhythm of writing:
 - regular short periods of work?
 - - > or intensive periods?
- Natural style and tendencies:
 - academic scientific writing and formal style?
 - or a literary, 'poetic', or essayistic approach?
- Which areas you wish to improve: **Writing is learned by writing**

What is your perspective?

- Who are you and from what background are you writing from?
 - what informs you the most in writing your thesis?
 - your motivation and your voice.
 - Enlighten the topic with your own experiences.
- Artist, designer, theorist, actor, environmentalist, craftsman or an engineer all have different voices.

What is your perspective?

- Is your aim to challenge/question, to find a solution, to contribute or reveal?
- What are your interests in doing the research?
 - practical
 - critical
 - emancipatory
 - or something else?

Who are you writing for?

Contextualize your work within the field

- What are the conventions of writing in your discipline?
- What language – nouns, verbs, links, etc. writers use?
- How are debates/arguments represented?
- How is the researcher represented, if at all?
- What are the options in style and structure?

Once you know these, the choice is yours.

Introducing and concluding

The introduction and ending (conclusion) play an important role in all writing:

- An accustomed thesis reader may, on the basis of the initial and final chapters, obtain sufficient insight into the key ideas of the work.
- The length of the introduction varies from one paragraph to the entire first chapter, depending on the text length.

Introducing and concluding

- Regardless of length, the initial task is to:
 - **tell the reader what the text is about** and
 - **what to expect.**
- In this sense, the introduction is the most important section of work.

Introducing and concluding

- The thesis's introductory chapter sets out **the objectives of the study** that the work is then progressing and finally returning to in the final chapter.
- **The traditional function of the thesis's ending is to summarise or conclude the issues presented in the text.**

Introducing and concluding

- The start and end ratio could be described as a relationship between the question and the answer.
- The final chapter may also **assess the success of the study**, for example in terms of material and methodology.

Pay attention to the structure of the text

- Distribute text based on content to main and subcategories.
- Use meta text to refer to the text written earlier or future chapters:
 - As stated in Chapter 2.
 - I shall examine this further in chapter 5.
- Pay attention to your titles as they guide the reader. A good title is interesting and tells about the content.

Pay attention to the structure of the text

- Key terms: Whenever you mention a **concept** or **key term for the first time**, it should be **defined according to your sources** or by how you are defining the term in that context.
- In case you have a lot of specific terminology, a separate chapter dedicated to this is also possible.

Structuring your text

- Text usually runs smoothly when it has content-structuring elements that allow the reader to structure the text while reading:
 - conjunctions
 - transition structures
 - connecting and commenting phrases.

Structuring your text

- Sentence connectors are used to link ideas from one sentence to the next and to give paragraphs coherence.
- These perform different functions and are placed at the **beginning** of a sentence. They are used to introduce, order, contrast, sequence ideas, theory, data etc.

Useful sentence connectors

Logical / sequential order

- Firstly, secondly, thirdly etc
- Next, last, finally
- In addition
- Furthermore
- Also
- At present / presently

Order of importance

- Most / more importantly
- Most significantly
- Above all
- Primarily
- It is essential / essentially

Sentence connectors

Contrast

- However
- On the other hand
- On the contrary
- By (in) comparison
- In contrast

Result

- As a result
- As a consequence
- Therefore
- Thus
- Consequently
- Hence

Sentence connectors

Comparison

- Similarly
- Likewise
- Also

Reason

- The cause of
- The reason for

Structuring your text

Eliminate repetition, good sources for finding variation

- Thesauruses and dictionaries: e.g. Merriam-Webster.com, Microsoft word synonym function

Remember the writing order

- Preliminary introduction first, revised introduction last
- Do the conclusions match the introduction?

Use common academic phraseology

- E.g.: Manchester Academic Phrasebank

Spelling tips

In academic writing contractions should not be used:

- It's > It is, Don't > Do not
- Sometimes these may be used as effects -> autoethnographical or essay approach

Abbreviations: once presented, keep the same form

- A Journal of Performance and Art, PAJ

Spelling tips

British English/American English have different spelling, choose one

- Humour/humor; colour/color

Decimal point/comma – 5,7 (Finnish)/5.7 (English)

Avoid weak verbs & passive form

Choice of verbs (informal/formal)

- get: acquire, procure, receive, gain, obtain, achieve, attain
- go: proceed, pass, process, transfer, transmit
- have: possess, include, contain, involve, consist of, undergo
- put: place, attach, insert, apply, connect, join, link, unite, adhere, anchor, secure, implant, imbed
- do: perform, implement, execute, complete, conduct, function, operate
- make: produce, generate, create, assemble, build, construct, erect, fabricate, forge, form, frame, manufacture, mold
- give: provide, offer, supply, transfer, yield, allow, permit, enable, contribute
- carry out: accomplish, execute, implement
- happen, take place: occur, materialize

Editing your text

The text is rarely done at once:

- Most often it improves with refining and rewriting.
- After finishing some of the text, it may be useful to leave it for awhile, after some time, you are able to look at and improve upon it more objectively.

Editing your text

The aim is to create as good text as possible. Some matters to consider:

- Are the main issues established clearly and sufficiently broadly?
- Have the key issues been adequately illustrated?
- Has the reader been taken into account?
- Is the terminology understandable and clear?
- Are the sentence structures clear?

Editing your text

- Is the paragraph division consistent?
- Is the overall structure of the text coherent?
- Is the beginning inspiring and the end orderly?

You can still change and improve each item in the writing phase.

The main ideas should be kept in mind throughout the writing work.

Finalising the written work

- Did you answer the questions set for the research?
- Check the evaluation criteria from the thesis guideline
- Cover sheet: full information of the author & institution
- Grammar: punctuation, spelling, ...
- Proofing: MOT dictionaries or other proofreading tools (e.g., Grammarly).
- Academic Writing Clinic

Finalising the written work

Checklist:

- Full equivalence between table of content + text
- Referencing: adequate & coherent?
- Bibliography
- Images
- Page numbers
- Appendices

Finalising the written work

- Turnitin check with your supervisor -> this also helps you in checking that your references are correct
- Find people to read the whole text and comment. It is beneficial to hear comments from both colleagues and people who are not familiar with your field.

Choosing an academic writing style

The thesis must meet the requirements for good communication skills within your own field of practice.

- The literary style of the thesis can either be scientific, or more free flowing and essayistic.
- Although scientific writing is a commitment to academic practice, there are many accepted ways of writing scientific text.

Choosing an academic writing style

- It is not necessary to repeat the manners of academic writing as such. You can learn and create your own style and develop it.
- It is also possible to combine different styles of writing in the thesis and, where needed, to distinguish these by the structure, layout and various visual means used in the thesis.

Scientific writing

Structured, objective and demonstrates critical thinking:

- Clear and concise
- Analytical and precise
- Objective, cautious and logical

Scientific writing

- As transparent as possible and explains how the concepts, knowledge and results have been obtained.
- The findings and results are explained and comparable to the previous knowledge.

Scientific writing

- The results may not speak for themselves unless the author proves their significance and makes clear conclusions about them.
- The explored phenomena are described and analysed by conceptualizing them through various theories and theoretical concepts.

Scientific writing

- The theories used should be justified by the research problem and the objectives of the study.
- The author must always define concepts they use -> the theory that the concepts are based on and/or what the author means by the concepts themselves should be defined.
- The selected methods are explained and validated to the reader so that they can assess the validity of the work.

Perspectives on scientific text

- Scientific writing is usually taking part in the on going discussion within scientific community.
- The goal is to give a contribution: to bring something new to increase common knowledge, understanding and skills.

Perspectives on scientific text

- A new understanding is built by:
 - looking at a phenomenon from a new perspective
 - experimenting and gathering material
 - or developing working methods and new models
 - or theories to analyse material or phenomenon.

Perspectives on scientific text

- Scientific text is a discourse between different sources.
- The research process begins through familiarisation with prior research and what has been done previously.
- Based on this, a research task is outlined. Through the text different sources discuss with each other.
- One of the objectives may be to engage in dialogue between literary and experiential and practice-based material.

Perspectives on scientific text

- Referring to other texts, **intertextuality**, demonstrates the researchers expertise in the research area and the placement of their own research task within the field.
- Scientific text is also a dialogue with the reader.
- The voice of the researcher is formed so, that it not only communicates expertise and reliability, but also openly informs **about *experiences, the research* and *its methods* and *results*.**

Essayistic writing

An essay is a non-formal and an analytic or interpretative literary composition, usually dealing with its subject from a limited or personal point of view:

- Subjective
- Associative, uses metaphors and figures of speech
- Pondering approach to a topic
- Open ended resolutions

Essayistic text

- As thesis in an essay form will allow the development and expression of your thinking in written form. The French word *essai* means *to test* and *to try*.
- The essay is a flexible and adaptable literary genre, which settles somewhere between scientific writing and literary writing.
- The theme or topic of an essay text is generally not limited, it can cover any subject. However, philosophical or social issues, art and literature are often reflected upon.

Essayistic text

- The essay is a more unrestricted form of writing than scientific text, but it is also a linguistically and stylistically a more demanding genre.
- The essay can be:
 - objective and instructive
 - or discursive, informal and intimate

Essayistic text

- The free form is challenging: the essay requires precise thinking and understandability.
- The topic may also be discussed in more personalized manner.
- The essay is a freely associative play of the mind and spirit, which does not seek synthesis.

Essayistic text

- It is described as a test in which:
 - The thinker puts their thoughts to the test,
 - or a winding path – where the author directs the passage of their readers.
 - Every word opens up new spaces thinking and new opportunities – but also relates to what has been said before.
- The most important thing is not to achieve a final truth **but to present the writers movement of thought.**

Essayistic text

- Although the subjective voice of the writing 'I' can be powerful, the essay is not a monologue, but a form of *dialogue*. The author is freer to express their own opinion openly, but also has to take note of the opposing perspectives.
- Referencing practices are usually more liberal for an essay, though it should show where the quotations originate from.
 - > **However, with a thesis you should use general academic writing reference recommendations.**

Research in essayistic form

The term treatise (research) essay can be used if the written text is more liberal than the traditional academic format but contains a research approach.

- In this form the author's freedom and creativity is presented with both relying on source materials and a more objective, conversational writing style.
- The research essay is not descriptive poetry, but about examining the subject. The style is important, but it serves to make the content understandable.

Research in essayistic form – traditional structure

- 1. Introduction
- 2. theory basis (the title describing the theory)
- 3. documentation/presentation of practical activities from a theory perspective
- 4. Reflections/Conclusions

Thesis in an essayistic form – perspectives & possibilities

- Writing from a number of perspectives or one reasoned point of view
- The possibility of exploring literary means of expression, metaphors and various contrast and parallels (possibility to assimilate different phenomena in new ways)
- Freedom of expression and opinion
- Personal relationship to the topic
- Requires expertise of the topic and ability to manage the chosen style
- Often requires more work than a more 'traditional approach'

Thesis examples available at Aalto doc

Thesis with an essayistic approach:

- master_Ström_Elina_2020
- master_Nyberg_Fabian_2017

Artistic research:

- master_Dempsey_Oscar_2020
- master_Ensterä_Maria_2020
- master_Csilla_Szolovak_2021

Practice based research / Case studies:

- master_Koivurinta_Eve_2019

Research oriented approach:

- master_Salomaa_Heli_2018

+ Several others, some available at Aalto docs, some only at the learning centre or at the programmes own thesis library. Please contact the student assistant if you wish to access these.